

Basic Care of Guinea Pigs

The Guinea Pig

The guinea pig (*Cavia porcellus*) is a rodent and is a domesticated version of the wild cavies of the Andes Mountain area of South America. They were first domesticated by the Andean Indians of Peru, who used them as a food source and as a sacrificial offering to Incan gods. During the 16th century, Dutch explorers introduced guinea pigs to Europe, where fanciers selectively bred them. The guinea pig entered the research laboratory in the 18th century, and has since made significant contributions to the scientific community.

There are five basic varieties of guinea pig. The most common is the English or shorthaired variety characterized by uniformly short hair coat. Abyssinian guinea pigs have rough looking coats, which are



arranged in whorls. Peruvian guinea pigs have extremely long hair. The Silky guinea pig is a larger variety and is distinguished by its medium length silky hair coat. The Teddy Bear guinea pig is characterized by medium length hair of normal consistency. These last 2 varieties are encountered less commonly.

Guinea pigs are very social and gentle animals, making them very good pets. They rarely bite or escape from cages, are not difficult to care for, and may live 5 to 7 years. They are most active at dawn and dusk (crepuscular). Some

guinea pigs engage in a behavior known as stampeding, which involves running wildly around the perimeter of the cage. Barriers used to inhibit this type of behavior may cause injury to young pigs. When overcrowded, guinea pigs may chew the hair of other guinea pigs (barbering). Guinea pigs will eat their own feces. This is a natural behavior essential to good health because it provides extra vitamins and nutrients (see Health Care of Guinea Pigs).

Veterinary Care

In order to maintain the health of your guinea pig, it is important to determine the presence of any problems. Since they are adept at masking the signs of illness, regular examinations are a valuable addition to preventative care. An examination by a veterinarian is crucial to keeping your guinea pig healthy. Problems

detected early can often be treated more easily and effectively.

New guinea pigs should be examined soon after they enter the home. At this time, the veterinarian can establish the current health status of the guinea pig and give recommendations for husbandry. After this initial

examination, annual examinations should be maintained until the age of 4 years old. At the age of 4 years old, guinea pigs are considered senior. Senior patients should have a thorough physical exam every 6 months.

“Routine veterinary care may help identify potential underlying health problems early and treat them successfully.”

Housing

Guinea pigs do not climb or jump well and therefore can be kept in plastic bottom tub cages with wire tops, open bins, or any other type of safe, easily cleaned container. If housed in open enclosures the sides should be at least 10 inches high. Also, be sure other family pets, such as dogs and cats, are not a threat. Enclosures made of wood should not be used due to difficulty in cleaning and susceptibility to destructive gnawing. Many plastics are also easily destroyed by gnawing. Ideally, the enclosure should have one open side for adequate ventilation. In addition, the cage should be free of sharp edges and other potential hazards. At least four square feet of floor space should be available for each guinea pig.

Cage flooring can be either wire or solid. Solid flooring is recommended over wire flooring. Wire mesh flooring provides a cleaner environment and easier maintenance, but may result in injuries to the feet and hocks. Housing on wire

over long periods of time can result in footpad and hock infections from abrasive rubbing on fecal soiled wire. Broken legs are common in guinea pigs that fall through the wire mesh. Although solid flooring requires more effort to keep sanitary, it is safer for the guinea pig.

Bedding materials must be clean, non-toxic, absorbent, relatively dust free and easy to replace. Acceptable beddings are recycled paper litter, pine wood shavings, shredded paper, and processed ground corncob. Make sure the ground corncob is properly processed to reduce fungal spore problems. Cedar shavings should NEVER be used since they have been associated with causing respiratory and liver disease. Sawdust should also be avoided since it tends to accumulate within the external genitalia of male guinea pigs causing an impaction. Remove soiled bedding and stale food daily. Replace old bedding with fresh clean bedding weekly.

Cages should be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized at least once weekly. Bleach diluted 1:32 makes an excellent disinfectant if used after cleaning and rinsed off well.

Guinea pigs are more comfortable and relaxed when housed in a quiet spot away from noise, excitement and other such stresses. They need to be kept in a cool, dry environment with adequate ventilation. Temperatures should be kept between 60-75 degrees and 40-70% humidity.

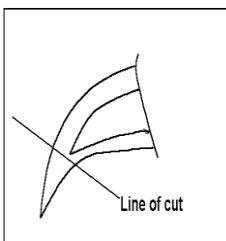
Guinea pigs need a spot to hide and feel safe for sleeping and resting. A hide box can be a cardboard box, plastic igloo, or a hay tunnel/bungalow. Cardboard tubes, PVC piping and/or flower pots are fun additions to the cage for guinea pig play time and enrichment. Finally, provide something for your guinea pig to chew on. Small branches or twigs, untreated wood, or cardboard works well.

Grooming

Most guinea pigs will do most of their own grooming. They keep their fur clean and maintain themselves well. There are a few things they may need help with, however. The first is trimming the toenails. Once every 2-3 months it is a good idea to trim the tips of the nails. If the

nail is clear, the quick can be seen as a pink area within the nail. Dark nails are more difficult. The quick should be avoided. Have one of our staff show you how to trim nails. If you do this at home, you should have some styptic powder or corn starch available to stop any

bleeding. Nicking a quick is not life-threatening, but it can be messy and it does hurt the guinea pig. Often, a horny growth is present extending from the foot pads. Consult your veterinarian prior to trimming these. Brushing, bathing, or ear cleaning may be required under certain circumstances.



Handling

Generally, guinea pigs are docile, non-aggressive animals. They rarely bite or scratch when handled. They usually voice their protest simply by letting out a high-pitched squeal. They may, however, struggle when being picked up or restrained. Extreme care should be taken not to injure them during handling. They should be approached with both hands. One hand is

placed under the chest and abdomen, while the other hand supports the hindquarters.

Children should be closely supervised around guinea pigs. Aside from outright injury, guinea pigs can become stressed by the erratic movement of some animals and children. Interactions between different species (dogs, cats,

rabbits, etc.) should be discouraged. Dogs and cats can cause bodily harm to the guinea pig. In addition, other species can carry bacteria or disease that guinea pigs have no immune defense to leading to serious and sometimes fatal infections.



Breeding

Breeding guinea pigs is relatively easy since they are social and males and females can be kept together. However, several factors must be kept in mind. In addition, homes must be found for the 2 to 4 babies.

Females (sows) should be bred between 4-6 months of age. After this time frame, the guinea pig may not be able to deliver babies normally. The reason for this is that the pelvis of the guinea pig fuses at this early age, narrowing the birth canal and preventing the babies from passing easily.

Overweight sows often will develop pregnancy toxemia. Males (boars) should be at least 4 months of age before breeding.

The length of pregnancy is 59-72 days. The time of delivery is difficult to assess due to the relatively long gestation period and lack of nest building. An uncomplicated delivery usually takes about ½ hour with an average of 5 minutes between babies.

Unfortunately, abortions and stillbirths are not uncommon. The young are born fully furred, with eyes open and

able to eat solid food. It is recommended to allow them to nurse for 3 weeks before weaning. Nursing females should be separated from males to prevent mating. A female can be pregnant with one litter while nursing another.

If breeding is not desired, males can be neutered and females spayed to avoid unwanted litters and potential diseases associated with the reproductive tract.



“Females should be bred between 4-6 months of age to prevent dystocia and the need for a C-section.”

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